



Maronite Eparchy of Australia,
New Zealand and Oceania



THE SAINT MASSABKI MARTYRS

FRANCIS | ABDUL-MOOTI | RAPHAEL



Introduction



Introduction

The history of the Maronite Church is very rich with stirring accounts of holiness. It tells of saints, ascetics, hermits, monks and nuns who answered the call of the Lord to follow Him and bear witness to Him, and never looking back.

Maronite history is also distinguished by the righteous martyrs who received the crown of martyrdom for their love of Christ, and their voices still echo: "The faith of Peter is my faith, and my faith is the faith of Peter." We are reminded of the words of St Peter himself:

... even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:14-17)

As St Peter teaches, true sanctity resides in Christ, and the true saint is sanctified through faith in Christ. This holiness is the sign that our Church continues upon that journey to God which began with our father, Saint Maroun, which we celebrate today, and will continue to live in the future.

We are given fresh heart by the fact that, after he had beatified Blessed Patriarch Mar Estephan Douaihy on August 2, 2024, Pope Francis canonised on Sunday, October 20, 2024, as saints of the universal church, the three blessed Massabki brothers: Francis, Abdel Moati and Raphael, who received the crown of martyrdom in the bloody persecution of 1860, in the Franciscan Monastery Church in Damascus, along with eight other monks of the monastery.

The canonisation falls during the Synod of Catholic Bishops in Rome, under the title "For a Synodal Church," held between October 2 and 27, 2024 in the Vatican.

In the midst of the difficult and painful crisis in Lebanon, the Holy Land, Syria and the Middle East more generally, a bright heavenly light shines upon us today, borne by the Massabki Brothers, following the example of our other Maronite saints. The saints are a role model for us all, showing how to follow Christ. In their spirituality, many dimensions of the Christian evangelical message are revealed, that we may be the light in the midst of darkness, life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of despair, and "the salt of the earth and the light of the world." The Lord Jesus Christ said, "Do not be afraid, for I have overcome the world." Today he tells us: "Even with all the wars, tragedies and darkness, I send you saints. Do not be afraid, for light overcomes darkness. Do not be afraid," he says, "for love defeats evil. Do not be afraid, for you are worth more than many sparrows. Do not be afraid because I am with you until the end of time."

Given the importance of the canonisation of the Massabki Brothers, saints for all the Holy Apostolic Catholic Church, and the first Maronite laymen to be raised to our altars as martyrs and saints, we are delighted to shine a light on their lives and glorious deaths. It is our privilege to make available to you the tenth general letter of His Beatitude and Eminence Mar Bechara Boutros Cardinal Rai, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. His Beatitude addressed this letter to the Maronite Church to tell them of the Blessed Massabki Brothers. in Arabic and English.

Indeed, God is glorified in His saints.

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand
and Oceania



Mar Bechara Boutros El Rai
By God's Grace
Patriarch of Antioch and all the East
and Cardinal of the Universal Church

To our brothers, the Eminent Bishops,
To the Reverend General Superiors and Mother Superiors,
To the dear sons and daughters of our Maronite Church, the
priests, deacons, monks and nuns,
As well as all the other beloved faithful in Lebanon, in the
patriarchal sphere, and throughout the diaspora,
Peace in the Lord Jesus, accompanied by our prayers and
apostolic blessing.





Introduction

1. The Blessed Lay Brothers, the Martyrs Francis, Abdul-Mooti and Raphael Massabki, from Damascus, who in their lives gave a wonderful testimony of their faith, and then sealed it with the testimony of their blood on the night of 9-10 July 1860, preferring death over the denial of Christ, are braiding upon the head of our Maronite Church a new crown of glory.

His Holiness Pope Francis has kindly accepted the petition to count them among the saints, in his interview with Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, on the morning of Saturday, December 17, 2022.

2. It was the decision of the Synod of Bishops of our Holy Church at the session held on Saturday, June 18, 2022, that the Patriarch, on behalf of the bishops, should petition His Holiness Pope Francis to facilitate and expedite the cause for declaring the sainthood of the three Blessed, stating the following justifications: "They are lay people, two of them were married and raised families; they are the first Orientals to be beatified according to the canons of the Holy See; their relics are mixed with those of the eight Blessed Franciscan Martyrs who were martyred with them in the church of their monastery, and this is a sign of the unity of blood between East and West; and finally because they are from Damascus. This is a joy for our church and dioceses in Lebanon and Syria, the patriarchal sphere and the diaspora."¹

In fact, I addressed this petition to His Holiness, on behalf of the Synod of Bishops of our Holy Church, on July 6, 2022, Protocol 140/2022, signed by us and by our brother, Bishop Munir Khairallah, Secretary of the Synod.

This cause does not require the existence of a canonically and scientifically proven miracle achieved through their intercession, but rather the emphasis is placed on their exemplary Christian life, and on the importance of the radiation of their canonization in all places and under the current circumstances. It is referred to by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints as "Canonizatione equipollente."²

3. The General Superior of the Franciscan Order Fra Massimo Fusarelli, ofm, wrote to us on February 7, 2023,

asking us to address His Holiness and petition for including the eight Franciscan martyrs in the canonization decision of the Blessed Massabki brothers. We addressed the petition to the Holy Father on February 28, 2023, and informed His Eminence Cardinal Semeraro about it.

Here are the names of the eleven martyrs:

- A. Maronites from Damascus:
 - 1. Francis Massabki
 - 2. Abdul-Mooti Massabki
 - 3. Raphael Massabki
- B. From the Latin rite Franciscans:
 - 1. Manuel Ruiz Lopez
 - 2. Carmelo Bolta Banuls
 - 3. Engelbert Kolland
 - 4. Nicanor Ascanio de Soria
 - 5. Pedro Soler Méndez
 - 6. Nicolas Maria Alberca Torres
 - 7. Francisco Pinazo Penalver
 - 8. Juan Jacobo Fernandez y Fernandez.

It is to be noted that Blessed Engelbert Kolland is Austrian, while the other seven are Spanish. Moreover, the first six martyrs are priests, while the last two are religious who were not ordained.

4. This encyclical contains four chapters: the first examines the radiance of the lives of the three Massabki brothers, the second addresses their martyrdom, the third covers the martyrdom of the Christians of Damascus, and the fourth studies their beatification and preparation for canonization. The references from which they were drawn are The Book of Mrs. Maryam Sfeir Al-Daya: The Blessed Martyr Brothers, Sarba 2008; Dr. Tony Daou's Book: Our Witness and Our Martyrs... Lebanon, 2017; an in-depth study by His Eminence Bishop Salim Sfeir: From the Way of the Cross to a Way of the Cross Exemplified in the Martyrs and Saints... (unpublished); Summary of the Beatification Decree of the Martyrs of Damascus By His Excellency Bishop Guy Boulous Njeim (unpublished).

1. (Report of Bishop Guy-Boulos Najem, Chairman of the Follow-up Committee for the Cause of Canonization. The committee was composed of their Excellencies the Bishops: Guy Boulous Najem, Samir Nassar, Joseph Moawad, Paul Rouhana and Salim Sfeir)

2. (Report of Archbishop Salim Sfeir, assigned by the Follow-up Committee for the Cause of Canonization to pursue the case in Roman Dicasteries).

The Radiance of their Lives.

5. The reason behind the martyrdom of the Massabki brothers is their committed Christian faith, and their life witness in their Damascus setting. They were aware of their calling to live out the requirements of their baptism, which made them living members of the mystical Body of Christ that is the Church. They kindled their faith by prayer and participation in daily Mass, receiving the Lord's Body, being enlightened by the word of God, and, in accordance with the advice of the Apostle Paul, by leading "a life worthy of the saints"³. They perfectly combined the care for their families and for temporal affairs with the exigencies of their spiritual life. This principle has been laid out by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council on the spirituality of Christian life in the world⁴.

In doing so, they aligned their lives with the great cry of Saint Leo: "Christian, know your dignity!"⁵. They recognized the honor bestowed upon them by baptism. They answered within the depths of their souls the call of St. Augustine: "Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ"⁶.

6. The Massabki brothers lived the call to holiness, which the Church considers an all-encompassing invitation to both her clergy and her faithful. Chapter V of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "Lumen Gentium", approved by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in November 1964, has been devoted to that subject. It reads: "The Church is holy because Christ, the Son of God, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is praised as 'uniquely holy', loved her as his bride, delivering Himself up for her⁷, united her to him as his Body, and filled her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God. Therefore, everyone in the Church, pastors and believers, is called to holiness. 'For God wants to sanctify us'⁸

7. This is how the lives of the Massabki brothers radiated:

Blessed Francis,

Married to Alisabat Sheeha, a Damascusite, and father of eight children: Michael, Boutros, Antoine, Mariam, Jouriye, Catherine, Theresia, and Susan. He was keen on

teaching, instructing, and giving them an authentic Christian education.

He owned a silk trade shop in Khan al-Tutun in Damascus. Thanks to his diligence, energy, good management, and integrity, he gained wealth, honor, and success. He came to be trusted by everyone involved in the silk trade, not only in Damascus, but also in Syria and Lebanon. He bought and sold faithfully, and paid his dues honestly and accurately. Therefore, the Maronite Patriarchate delegated him for some of its civil matters, and the families of Al-Khazen, Al-Dahdah, Al-Bitar, Abillamah, Toubia, Ghossoub, Habib Murad, Ignatius Tohme, and others trusted him to run their businesses and sell their products, to the point that wherever he went in Lebanon, he was welcomed by many of his acquaintances. His stature was even greater among rulers and even all Muslims.

He was famous for his generosity, largesse, and relief for the poor and needy, as well as jealousy for God's houses. He contributed to the restoration and renovation of the Church of Damascus, and then the purchase of the house adjacent to it. His doors were open to every visitor and tourist, coming from near or afar, and his house was a preferred destination and guesthouse to them.

Despite his wealth and prestige, Francis never shied away from his religious duties. His nephew, Abdul-Mooti, describes him as follows: "He lived in fear of God and was very pious throughout his life. He venerated the Virgin, The Sorrowful Mother, on whose altar he was martyred, by reciting the Angelic Salutation, greeting her with it every day, and by reciting the Rosary and the prayers of the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

In both his old age and younger years, he got up early to praise his Lord, meditating and praying, and then went to church to participate in the Divine Liturgy. In the evening, with his family and the family of his brother Abdul-Mooti, who lived with him, they recited the prayer of thanksgiving and the Rosary, did the Spiritual Exercises in honor of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, and read chapters of spiritual books to nourish their souls and strengthen their faith. He also used to close his shop early in order to participate with his family in the Stations of the Cross.

3. (Ephesians 3:5)

4. (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 4)

5. (See Pope John Paul II, *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*, footnote 48)

6. (*ibid.*, footnote 50).

7. (*cf.* Ephesians 5:25 -26)

8. (*cf.* Lumen Gentium, chap. V, para. 39).



8. Blessed Abdul-Mooti

He and his wife, nicknamed "the daughter of the drunkard," and his five children, Nehme, Yusuf, Mariam, Wardi and Hannah, lived in the house of his brother Francis. Abdul-Mooti took diligent care of their education and upbringing. The youngest, Hannah, entered religious life with the Sisters of Charity and took the name of Sister Ephraizia. Thus, she lived and died for the love of God and Our Lady.

He spent most of his life teaching at the Franciscan Monastery School. In his teaching, he took great care to explain the principles of the Christian religion, exhorting the students to love God and avoid the causes of sin.

When teaching became tiresome because of his old age, his brother Francis opened a shop for him. However, his capital kept shrinking instead of increasing, due to of Abdul-Mooti's tolerance in weights and prices for the sake of his conscience, which led to the closure of the shop.

His son Nehme reports: My father, after reciting his daily prayers, went to the Franciscan Church every morning, and attended all the Masses on his knees. Every eight days and on feast days, he approached Holy Communion. On the evening of Holy Thursday, he would go to the church and remain on his knees until the morning of Good Friday. Afterwards, he would stay in the monastery until Sunday midnight, then go to the Maronite Church for Mass and Easter Communion, and finally return home. He did this throughout his life.

One of his students, George Bitar, recounted that he always knelt during Mass, to the point where his knees became like camel knees, according to another eyewitness.

It was reported that he would go early with his daughter Hannah to the Franciscan Church every morning upon the tolling of the bell, even on rainy and snowy winter days. Their footprints would be visible on the snow, and people would say, Abdul-Mooti and his daughter passed from here.

One of his students recounted that, in explaining the Catechism, Abdol-Mooti would say that a Christian should always be ready to shed his blood for the love of Christ, and that the greatest grace a Christian can receive is the grace of martyrdom. The student added that Abdul-Mooti visited the Eucharist every day with reverence, respected all the required fasts, in addition to fasting every Saturday, abstaining from oil on Wednesdays and Fridays, and earnestly teaching the children to re-enact the rite of raising Lazarus from the grave.

9. Blessed Raphael

He spent his life as a celibate helping the monastic community of the Franciscan Fathers as well as his family on certain occasions. He persevered in prayer and in the love of the Virgin. He stayed at the church of the Franciscan monastery for many long hours during the day, and participated in the household prayers with the families of Francis and Abdul-Mooti in the evening.



Chapter Two

Their Martyrdom

10. The martyrdom of the three Massabki brothers came to be by the Ottoman authorities in Damascus on the nights of July 9 and 10, 1860, referred to as "The Two Days of Blood." Due to the increasing unrest in Damascus, and in the wake of the attacks on Christians (Latin, Orthodox, Byzantine and Maronite) by extremists who wanted to kill them, a number of them sought refuge and protection in the Franciscan monastery in the neighborhood of Bab Touma. At 8 p.m. on the night of Monday, July 9, 1860, Francis and his brothers Raphael and Abdul-Mooti joined the monastery near their home. At 11 p.m., the doors of the monastery were closed and everyone entered the church. They confessed their sins, received the Holy Eucharist, and recited in their hearts the Psalm "The LORD is my light and my salvation— Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the refuge and fortress of my life— Whom shall I dread? Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident..."

At 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday, the heavily armed attackers infiltrated the monastery, broke into the congregation, and killed eight Franciscan monks, together with three laymen who worked at the monastery.

Then the armed men began shouting, "Where is Francis Massabki?" while he knelt in prayer before the statue of the Virgin Mary. Francis got up and fearlessly approached them saying, "I am Francis Massabki, what do you seek?" They replied, "The Governor sent us to save you, your brothers, your families, and everyone who joins you, and to give you back your money, provided that you deny your faith and convert to Islam, otherwise you will all perish." This offer came from the Governor because he had borrowed a large sum of money from Francis.

Francis answered them: "The governor can take my money, but my faith nobody can take away from me... We are not afraid of those who kill the body... We are Christians and in the religion of Christ we shall die. We Christians do not fear those who kill the body, as the Lord Jesus said. We have but one soul, and we shall not lose it." Then, he turned to his brothers and said to them, "Take courage and stay strong in your faith, for the crown of victory is prepared in heaven for

those who persevere to the end."

They immediately professed their faith in the Lord Jesus with these words: "We are Christians and we want to live and die as Christians." Then, Francis returned to his prayer. The attackers stormed them, striking with their sticks, daggers and axes, at the foot of the altar, and so they surrendered their pure souls into the hand of God, preferring death to disbelief, and thus received the crown of martyrdom. It happened on the dawn of July 10, 1860.

11. The massacres of 1860 are considered some of the most horrible sectarian massacres in the history of the Ottoman Empire (before the massacres of Armenians and Syrians), and many of the people of the Levant and Mount Lebanon still remember them with pain. They were the reason behind their immigration to the Americas, Africa and other parts of the world. One Syrian sociologist reports: "The massacres of 1860 began in Lebanon in April, and within a few weeks, more than 60 Christian villages in the Shouf and Metn areas had been reduced to ashes. In Hasbaya, instructions were given that no Christian male should remain alive between the ages of seven and seventy, and the scope of the disaster reached to Zahle, where almost every house was reduced to ashes. The disaster lasted for three months, 12,000 people were killed, and property losses were estimated at four million pounds..."



Chapter Three

Martyrdom of the Christians in Damascus

12. In July 1860, the spark reached Damascus, and there the catastrophe took another turn as the mob seized the city and began to kill and destroy with insatiable pleasure. In describing the massacre, the Levantine historian Muhammad Kurd Ali reports: "The most significant matter that occurred in this century was the incident of the Christians known as the incident of the sixties in 1860. In summary, it corresponds to the rising of some Muslim and Druze mobs against the Christians of Damascus, killing and looting them, and putting their neighborhoods on fire for five days until they became completely destroyed... Historians are almost unanimous that it was the Ottoman State that pushed the mob or turned a blind eye to them and thus they committed what they did..."

According to the novel of Mikhail Mashaqa, the researcher Nesib Nimr summarized the attack on Christians in Damascus as follows: "While the Christians were busy in their work and businesses in the vicinity of the city, some Muslim supporters of the State revolted against them, and blocked their roads. There was fear and terror. Many of them had come from far away, and so were unable to return to their homes and residences. They were forced to remain under imminent threat. If the Christians of the city had been able to go out and escape, they would not have hesitated for a moment, but they preferred to stay instead of escape, knowing that they would die on the road... When the situation reached this critical stage of aggravation, the Consuls of different states met in Damascus and objected to the Governor for his indifference to the events and unrest that were taking place under his eyes."...When the news of the massacre of Zahle on July 4, 1860 came in, Ahmed Pasha ordered festivities to be held and lighting of the streets in celebration of the conquest of Zahle, and repeatedly said: "O Allah, destroy the unbelievers."

13. In his book "Lebanon in History," Dr. Hitti studies the spread of massacres to Damascus, based on Cyril Graham, Mashaqa, and others. He considers that what "encouraged the people of Damascus to revolt against Christians was the

non-punishment of criminals in Lebanon and the collusion of Turkish officials with them. The people of Damascus burned the Christian quarter and killed more than ten thousand people. The total number of victims in the Syrian capital was 11,000 martyrs."

14. Other studies suggest that the attackers were about fifty thousand who came from far away and launched massive attacks on the Christian quarter. The number of invaders was estimated to be between 20,000 and 50,000. Within a few hours, the Christian quarter was flooded with aggressors, which demonstrates that the sedition was not spontaneous but rather premeditated, and that they were prepared for it. Dr. Hitti quotes Michael Mashaqa: "Hostility to Christians was not the only motive, for some sought to plunder and loot, on the basis of 'lawful loot from invasions,' since everyone was aware of the wealth of this neighborhood and the luxury of its contents, especially its churches and monasteries. Therefore, so many bandits and Bedouins joined, and even women and boys took part in the attack. It was only a matter of hours before the guarding soldiers assigned to protect the Christian quarter began to join the attackers and seize the loot. After a while, soldiers from other teams joined them. All the officers were absent from the barbaric scene. There was no one to deter the attackers from the poor people of the Christian quarter in the heart of the Umayyad capital. Worst of all, all the politicians, scholars, and ruling councillors disappeared from the scene, and no one tried to halt the attack."

15. In the aftermath of the martyrdom of the Damascene Christians, according to eyewitness Archimandrite Ignatius Deek, the fires lasted for two weeks. Approximately 11,000 people were killed in the massacre, some of them by the fires. More than 400 women were raped, and all houses, shops, churches, monasteries, schools and missionaries were looted and burned down. About 1,500-3,000 houses and 200 shops were reduced to rubble. About 200-300 houses were saved from the fire because they were close to the houses of Muslims, but they were not spared from looting. Eleven churches and three monasteries were destroyed. About 30 priests were killed, among them the "saint priest Yusuf al-Haddad al-Dimashqi" of the Marian Orthodox Church and 10 missionaries. The Greek Orthodox Church canonized him and celebrates his feast with the Blessed Massabkis on July 10, because he was martyred the same day in front of his Marian Church.





16. In the midst of the martyrdom of Christians in Damascus, a humanist Islamic story was being unraveled. Many of the dignitaries of Damascus, such as the Algerian prince, Assaad Efendi Hamza, Sheikh Salim al-Attar, Saleh Agha al-Shorbaji, Said Agha al-Nuri, and Omar Agha al-Abed, tried to protect Christians. However, some of them grew weak under the violence of the mob, and handed over to them the Christians they had, so the mob slaughtered them like ewes. Prince Abdelkader of Algeria protected more than a thousand Christians from death. Only he negotiated with the city's authorities, elders and scholars, trying to convince them that what they were doing was against Islam, but they did not listen to him and prevented him from fighting the rebels. His mission, and that of the honorable Muslims of Damascus, was limited to extending a helping hand to the Christians, and to saving as many as possible. Together with his men, he saved the monks of a French monastery that had been burned, as well as the Russian, Dutch, Belgian, American and Greek consulates and all European evangelical missions. Their employees also found shelter in Prince Abdelkader's house. All the consuls survived except the American and the Dutch. Moreover, the consulate of Russia and those who took refuge in it were not harmed. Among the survivors were those who were then in the protected neighborhoods of the pious Muslims, or hidden by a devout Muslim, or were able to reach the Damascus Citadel, which was under the protection of Askar Hashim Agha who rejected what was taking place.

17. Prince Abdelkader Al-Jazairi was born in Algiers in 1808, and raised by his parents on the principles of piety and fear of God, according to the Sufi School of Al-Qadiriya. He studied philosophy and the Quran early on. His dignity would not allow him to accept colonialism. At the age of 24, he launched a guerrilla war against colonials, for which he had recruited about 40,000 men. The combatting adversaries respected the moral principles of combat: good treatment of prisoners, respect for agreements, and a sincere search for just solutions to the conflict. Beginning in 1841, however, some French officials resorted to other methods contrary to these principles.

The French imprisoned him along with his family and other members of his entourage for five years. In 1852, the Algerian prisoner suddenly became a prominent figure in European society thanks to Emperor Napoleon III, who ordered his release, influenced by the many petitions

he received from the French and English, who resented the unjust treatment to which the Prince was subjected. This contributed to the reasons why Prince Abdelkader did not get angry with France. On the contrary, he was convinced that there were always and everywhere people of high moral character, and that he would build strong and true friendships throughout Europe. He finally landed in Damascus under a Franco-Ottoman agreement. He is considered a symbol for those who stand up against tyrants and firmly defend the rights of the people, given his bold lifelong positions, including his noble stance in the tragedy of 1860 in Damascus.

IV

Chapter Four

Their Beatification and Preparation for Canonization.

18. The presentation of the case for the Beatification of the three Massabki brothers is credited to the Archbishop of Damascus at the time, Beshara al-Chemali, who was the first to write their biographies in two books: "The Three Brother Martyrs" (Beirut 1926), and "The Day of Martyrs", a collection of readings, praises and prayers for the feast of the three martyrs (Harissa 1927). The Diocese of Damascus used to include what is known as the Vicariate of the Patriarchate of Sarba today and a part of the Diocese of Zahle.

On May 4, 1926, Archbishop Beshara al-Chemali petitioned Pope Pius XI, asking that the Holy See investigate the evidence for the martyrdom of the three Massabki brothers, like their fellow priests and Franciscan monks, and join the canonization cause of the Three Brothers to theirs. He did so in collaboration with Patriarch Elias Hoayek, the Synod of Bishops, and the Apostolic Nuncio in Syria, Ferdinando Giannini. The answer came on July 16 through the Apostolic Vicariate.

On August 10, Bishop Beshara al-Chemali received from Monsignor Salotti that His Holiness had appointed him as investigator in the case of the martyrdom of the Massabki brothers and their Beatification along with the Franciscan monks. Indeed, he came to Lebanon with the commission in September and conducted the necessary investigation.

19. On 7 October 1926, Pope Pius XI promulgated the Beatification Bull of the Three Massabki Brother Martyrs with these opening lines: "It is convenient that those who will receive the honor of solemn Beatification, this year and within the allotted days throughout the whole world to honor the seventh centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, are eight of his glorious sons, who shed their blood in our time as a testimony to faith in Christ. These unconquered heroes, killed by hatred of religion, by a group of ruthless Turks, in 1860, in their monastery in Damascus, linked spiritually to the province of the Holy Land, received the glorious crown of martyrdom in the eyes of the Lord. However, not only were the eight sons of St. Francis given

to shed their blood that day for the love of Christ, but the indignation of the Turks was also directed at the three brothers: Francis, Abdul-Mooti, and Raphael Massabki, sons of the Maronite Church. They did not want to leave the Franciscan Fathers alone in that distress, so they rushed to the monastery when they heard the commotion, and there they ate the heavenly bread, and prayed with the monks before the altar, not fearing for their children and their families, waiting for death with equanimity. The brutes who streamed into the monastery caught them, so they declared that they were Christians and that they were ready to die for their faith in Christ. Immediately, at the steps of the great altar, in the church of the Franciscan monastery, they were killed by the blows of a sharp iron axe."

20. On Sunday, October 10, 1926, the Beatification ceremony was held. Raised up on the Great Altar of St. Peter's Basilica were the relics of the Franciscan and Massabki martyrs; upon the two columns of the Great Dome were hung two pictures: one of the martyrdom incident, and the second of the martyrs before the altar of the Church of the Franciscan Monastery in Damascus, receiving the Body of the Lord from the hand of the abbot. A large picture was erected above the Great Door, depicting the martyrdom of each of the Beatified. The exterior facade was topped by another picture of the martyrs in the state of glory, while the angels around them scattered roses upon the earth.

Archbishop Beshara al-Chemali headed the Maronite delegation composed of General Superiors and some priests, including Pardiou Ibrahim Massabki, the Episcopal Vicar in Damascus and a relative of the martyrs.

Two days later, on October 12, the Pope told the Maronites in a private audience: "Our heart is filled with joy at meeting our dear Maronite children. There is no doubt that your hearts rejoice along with ours, and are refreshed and comforted, as you see the heads of some heroes representing the long struggle of your Church decorated with the crown of glory. The example of these three brothers, partners of torment and glory, is one of the most courage-inspiring factors in your hearts, especially you, the servants of the Holy. From them we all took a great example, the example of sacrifice for the sake of truth and faith. Yet, there are other sacrifices, which we all have to endure and suffer, every day, in the line of duty. For without sacrifice, duty cannot be fulfilled. This is the carrying of the Cross which the Savior has commanded to all who follow



him." He concluded by saying: "This is the example that your people and your entire community will follow."

On the occasion, Patriarch Elias Hoayek addressed a letter to his Maronite children, in which he noted the excellence of the martyred brothers in both the good performance of religious duties and diligence in the collection of money and the development of trade, until the sacrifice required choosing the heavenly wealth over the goods of the earth. Thus, they were an example of the possibility of reconciling religion with the world. They did not forget, while they were in the midst of the world, that they were created for a higher and honorable purpose.

21. The relics of the martyrs are preserved under the great altar in the cathedral of the diocese of Damascus. They include the relics of the three Massabki brothers and the eight Franciscan monks who were martyred together and buried in three places. These remains were exhumed in October 1861. They were placed in two boxes, one of which was handed over to the Archbishop of the Diocese Beshara al-Chemali. He ordered them to be venerated using the prayers and hymns he had published.

22. We are now invited to continue this veneration in preparation for the celebration of their canonization. We have assigned our brother, His excellency Bishop John-Rafic Al-Warsha, our Patriarchal Vicar to the Holy See, to follow up this matter with the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

The Synod of our Holy Bishops, at the June 2022 session, recommended that the bishops work to spread the veneration of the three Blessed Massabki brothers in their dioceses. We task the Commission set up by the Synod to "speed up the process of their canonization" to organize the publication of this veneration and to coordinate it with the Bishops of the eparchies. The committee is composed of their Excellencies, Bishops: Guy-Boulos Najem as president, Samir Nassar, Joseph Moawad, Boulos Rouhana, and Salim Sfeir.



Conclusion



Conclusion

23. The Massabki brothers have given a testimony of faith in their exemplary Christian life in the world, spiritualizing their temporal life through prayer, fasting, detachment and reception of the sacraments, which prepared them for the testimony of blood, without any fear or hesitation. They preferred death to the denial of their Christian faith, and held no grudge against their killers, but rather prayed for them. They had undoubtedly thought of Jesus' prayer from the top of the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!" (Luke 23:24).

24. Forgiveness for us Christians is at the heart of our evangelical culture and the civilization of our long history. It is the culture of forgiveness from the heart that the Lord Jesus teaches us: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do well to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44 -45).

This is the basis of what we call "the purification of the memory." We remember history to continue our testimony, to renew our mission, and to reform what is necessary in our lives.

25. The tragedy of July 1860 in Damascus constituted an ecumenical testimony of blood, during which, for the first time in history, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants from the East and the West bore witness together to Christ, as one Body, by sacrificing their lives. Thus, July 10 has become a day that brings Catholic and Orthodox Churches together to celebrate one holy event, in which all honest people, contemplating the unity of the testimony to Christ, hoping that the minds of those overcome by the aberration of hatred and thirst of domination will be enlightened, so that understanding and safety will reign over the world, especially in every suffering land, through the merits of Christ God and His Virgin Mary, the Holy Queen of Martyrs, and the gathering of the glorious martyrs and all other glorified holy fathers.



Prayer



Prayer

26. O great martyr of Calvary, you who gave us through your example and from your radiant cross of life, the example of the true sacrifice, and you have wished in every age and place to give us living examples of this sacrifice through your pure and chosen ones. Now, according to your holy will, grant us, through the intercession of your blessed martyrs, the three Massabki brothers who shed their blood for the sake of your love, and through the intercession of our Virgin Mary, your Most Holy Mother, new examples for the Christian community in our tormented East that was sanctified by the mystery of your life-giving death and glorious resurrection, in the likeness of these righteous martyrs, who went on as a community to fulfill your holy will to the point of martyrdom. Thus, your name will be glorified, your Church will triumph, faith will be restored and consolidated, your peace will return to this East, and it will shine with your love and radiate with your teachings and by the great innocence of its holy saints, as it radiated in the past by the merits of your blood that was shed in it, for the love of all humanity, our Lord and God, to you be glory and honor with your Blessed Father and your Holy Living Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.

From our Chair in Bkerki, 25 March 2023
The Feast of Our Lady of the Annunciation, the twelfth anniversary of my patriarchal service.

+ Cardinal Beshara Boutros Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and all the East



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